

March 9, 1999

## **Democrats Jeopardizing "Ed-Flex" by Limiting Local Choice** **Fifty Governors Favor Bill, But Democrats** **Put Politics Ahead of Students**

Democrats now threaten a good-faith Republican effort to provide substantial bipartisan education reform.

The Democrats' amendment to limit new spending on education to teachers — or nothing — is a complete contradiction to the intent of the underlying bill. The universal goal here — supported by all of the Nation's governors and their local school districts — is more flexibility within the education bureaucracy. Instead, Democrat spoilers effectively ignore the needs of students and propose only more top-down, Washington-knows-best partisan gimmickery. Their amendment shows a disdain for those on the front lines — local decision makers — who are best able to make and to monitor positive change.

Furthermore, if the Democrats' "all-or-nothing" teachers amendment were to pass, states would be forced to increase state taxes by more than \$100 per household just to pay their required share.

In short, this partisan "all-or-nothing" mandate might help a few students and some school districts, but will hurt many others by increasing taxes and denying local flexibility.

### **Limiting Flexibility — More Teachers or Nothing**

Under the Democrats' scenario, \$11.4 billion over six years is to be spent only to lower class size. More teachers mean smaller classes. Smaller classes mean better learning environments, right?

Well, maybe. Even the Democrat Progressive Policy Institute questions the wisdom of limiting new spending to just new teachers. They found that "no matter what the source of evidence, the answer about effectiveness is the same: *Broad policies of class-size reduction are very expensive and have little effect on student achievement.*"

Study after study concludes that student achievement is best assured through parental involvement and high-quality teachers, not classroom size. In fact, a University of Rochester

study — one of the most recent and comprehensive studies of class-size reduction — found that *class size had no impact* on student academic achievement, whereas the quality of the teacher had a profoundly positive impact on student achievement.

### **A Better IDEA — Fulfilling Promises Before Making New Ones**

On Thursday, March 4, the Senate unanimously agreed that part B of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) should be fully funded before obligating funds for new programs.

Special education students comprise about 12 percent of public-school enrollment. According to IDEA requirements, local schools must design special education programs specific to the individual needs of each special education child.

Needless to say, the costs of these individualized education plans are enormous. These students consume a disproportionate share of local school budgets. According to the June 17, 1996 *USA Today*, in Dayton, Ohio, annual per-pupil education expenditures for disabled children averaged \$25,000 or almost five times that expended on a general student.

IDEA requires that schools must guarantee all “special education children” an “appropriate” education. Unfortunately, this leaves localities with no choice but to leverage general education funding to cover the costs associated with special needs students. According to the Economic Policy Institute, 4 out of every 10 dollars in new education spending goes only to special education. From 1967 to 1991, the percentage of education dollars going to general education *actually declined* despite per-pupil spending doubling. Why? Special education's share skyrocketed from 4 percent of all education dollars to 17 percent.

### **Making Good on Congress' Unkept Commitment**

Congress originally pledged to cover 40 percent of these special education costs but as of FY99, according to Senator Judd Gregg, Congress covered less than 12 percent. If Congress commits to keep its 40-percent promise, state and local schools will have far more budget flexibility. This means more dollars at the state and local level for what they need, not what some Washington bureaucrats may say they need.

Let's keep our promises so that localities are not forced to choose between America's students and the federal bureaucracy — or between special- and general-education children.

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